DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 044 CS 206 770

AUTHOR Caputo, John S.
TITLE Becoming a Communicator: A Look at the English Primary School and the Development of Linguistic Strategies in Young School Children.
PUB DATE Jan 82
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Claremont Reading Conference (49th, Claremont, CA, January 14-15, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Language; *Communication Skills; Comparative Analysis; Curriculum Development; *Educational Research; Foreign Countries; *Language Acquisition; Language Arts; Language Proficiency; *Language Skills; *Primary Education; Public Education; Reading; Skills; Teaching Methods; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *England; United States

ABSTRACT

Based on a five month participant-observation study of two schools, this paper describes the organization and curriculum of English primary schools, with an emphasis upon strategies and materials used in developing linguistic competence in school children. The report describes the organization, curriculum, and development of communication competence in reading, writing, and speaking in the English schools, as indicated by field notes, slides, tape recorded interviews, informal discussions with headmasters and teachers, and official school documents compiled during the study, including curriculum guides and operational procedures. The final portion of the paper presents the conclusions of the study, which state that there is a much higher degree of achievement in the British primary school system than in the American public elementary schools, and that the English schools appear to be quite successful in teaching their major goal of communication competence. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED213044

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

BECOMING A COMMUNICATOR: A LOOK AT THE ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES IN YOUNG SCHOOL CHILDREN

John S. Caputo

The English Primary School has become a symbol for many school reformers in the past decade--a standard by which to judge the deficiencies of elementary schooling in America (Berlak, et al., 1973). This paper, based on a five month participant-observation study of several English primary schools, describes the organization and curriculum, with an emphasis placed upon strategies and materials used in developing linguistic competence in speaking, reading and writing.

The data for this study were gathered from July to December 1981. Several schools were visited and two schools were studied in depth. The schools studied contained students from both middle and working class neighborhoods, combining both infant and junior schools and were located in a small city in Kent, England. One school studied was parochial and the other school was non-denominational. Both schools were part of the same education authority, the teachers were hired by the same office, and they followed an identical curriculum with the exception of religion, although religion was taught in both schools. The data consists of field notes, slides, tape recorded interviews, informal discussions with headmasters and teachers, and official school documents including curriculum guides and operational procedures.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
John S. Caputo
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS206770

Organization

Schools for young children in England fall into three basic types, each of which is administered by a separate headmaster or headmistress: the infant school for children ages 5 to 7, the junior school for children ages 8 to 11, and the primary school which combines infants and juniors. The grades are Infant 1, 2 and 3 and Junior 1, 2, 3 and 4. These schools vary considerably from small rural schools with fewer than ten children to large schools with over 800 children. Children begin school at age 5 and there are three entry periods per year. Occasionally an infant school will allow a "rising 5" (children whose fifth birthday is sometime during the on-going term) to enter school a term early, but more likely the school will hold a once or twice weekly "play group" in which all "rising 5's" will be invited to visit the Infant 1 classroom during the term preceding their admission into the regular program. Generally speaking, the school day runs from 9 to 3:30 for all students including Infant 1's (which we would call kindergarten), and all students would have homework almost every night.

Curriculum

Most primary schools do not arrange their curriculum under subject headings and they have no specific timetables for when or how long a particular subject is taught. In addition, it is not unusual for students in the same classroom to be working on different subjects during the same time period.

If there is one major goal of the English Primary School, it is that they are particularly concerned with the development of language in the education of young school children. Much of the work undertaken by the primary school is designed with this in mind; through their work in all areas of the curriculum children extend and improve their ability to use language in a variety of contexts--be it "maths" (the English use this term as opposed to the word math), writing, literature, science, religion, story-telling, etc., the overall emphasis is on linguistic competence. Evidence of this goal can be seen in the following statement from the Kent Educational ENGLISH Scheme (1975):

> Language development--the role of language in reading, writing, and speaking, is central to the educative process. The school recognizes the fundamental role of language in thinking and learning, and its centrality to the school's life and work. It is through language that the child explores the world around him; on the growth of his language depends his ability to understand. Clearly, then, "English," or even "Language Development" should never be thought of as a separate "subject," but rather, as being integral to any educative experience.

Developing Communication Competence

The very clear emphasis then of the English Primary School is helping children become competent communicators. But what is a competent communicator? Attempts to explain the development of language are closely tied to the beliefs about the nature of language. These beliefs have changed over the past two decades with important consequences for teachers. The major view held in England at this time follows the lines of the social and pragmatic view proposed by Wilkenson (1971),

Halliday (1973), Wells (1981), and others, often referred to as functionalism. The school's role in this development is to allow the child to perform in a variety of communication contexts in order that she or he develop appropriate linguistic resources.

Reading. In looking at reading practices specifically, at all levels, there is a stress on understanding what is read, and upon making reading the pleasurable experience that it ought to be.

Once reading readiness is fostered early reading begins. The primary school approach to reading is that the sound-symbol correspondence should take place in the context of whole word recognition and reading for meaning. Reading is NOT simply an exercise in identifying shapes and sounds, but a thinking process. In the British Primary School, the belief is that the most effective teaching of reading is that which gives the pupil the skills and sub-skills she or he needs to make the fullest possible use of context clues in a search for meaning.

The two major reading schemes (series) utilized are: (1) the Ladybird Series, which is a mixed look-say and sentence method that is based upon words occurring most frequently in childrens' written language, and (2) Breakthrough to Literacy, an experience extension program distinguished by the attention to the spoken word, translated into writing. The Breakthrough to Literacy series marries child-language to a developing understanding of sentence structure and spelling

patterns. In both schemes, phonics work is not utilized until after a strong basic sight vocabulary has been gained, usually at the Junior level 1 (age 8), and a balance of writing is stressed to develop reading. On this importance of a balance of writing and reading, Wells (1981, pp. 279-84) states:

> . . . it is in the process of composition--in "wrestling with words and meanings"--whether to render subtleties of feeling, to convey precise observation of objects, or to develop a coherent line of reasoning, that one ultimately becomes most fully aware of the power--and limitations--of the written language. It is also through writing in various modes that one is called upon to develop those skills of literacy which are associated with higher levels of cognitive activity. In my view, therefore, the common practice of waiting until children are already quite fluent readers before encouraging them to compose written texts is to miss one of the most effective means of introducing them to the possibilities that this new medium of communication makes available.

In addition to the reading schemes children are expected to read a wide range of supplementary readers and library books appropriate to their standard of attainment.

Writing. Practice in writing begins from the first day of school at age five. The aim is to help the child convey his or her meaning, clearly and fluently as appropriate to differing occasions and purposes. Initially children write stories (in large stapled books of blank paper assembled by the teacher) based upon personal experiences and eventually begin to do some creative writing and drawing based upon stories read to them. Children are issued small blank books called "word books" in which all words a child wants spelled will be printed in the book by the teacher. Often the

teacher will write down a story a child dictates to her and then the child will copy the story in his or her own writing. Children's writing books are reviewed regularly and spelling and printing are commented on or corrected, if appropriate.

Work in writing continues through the grades building upon each year's experience. Practice in cursive writing begins by age six by beginning to make loops and other designs and finally moving into actual letter formation.

Speaking. Central to the development of writing and reading skills lies oral communication skills. Again the aim is to help the child convey his or her meaning, clearly and fluently in speech appropriate to different occasions and purposes. Children are encouraged at the Infant levels to talk to one another and in small groups informally as well as prepare talks on experiences outside of class as a form of language extension. Oral work then becomes indivisible from the main body of language experience. The Kent Education Authority (1975) posits,

> Lucid speech will be found to be a necessary step to lucid writing, and the ability to express ideas precisely, coherently, and in sequence will be of immeasurable value in discussions which, across the curriculum, clarify knowledge and internalize understanding.

Conclusions

The English Primary Schools establish environments in which learning takes place in a friendly classroom climate, so that the child feels confident in tackling the tasks that he or she has been given. In my observations, children were

successfully completing tasks that were advanced beyond the same age level in American public elementary schools, and there was a much higher degree of achievement in the English schools. If this is so, why don't American schools just adopt English teaching practices? At this stage of my research, I am not sure that the English Primary School is culturally transportable. Notions of the place of education--schools, learning, teaching, discipline, etc.--begin long before a child steps onto the school yard or into the classroom. The expectations of parents, children, and educators about the nature and functions of their enterprise together have a profound effect on what actually takes place in the schools. The comparisons between these expectations in English and American schools would need to constitute another paper which I am in the process of developing. In addition, I am conducting an empirical longitudinal investigation on the teaching and learning of linguistic strategies in the early grades in America and England to see if there are any long-range effects of these differences.

At this point, I can say that the English Primary School seems quite successful at reaching their major goal of developing language (communication competence) in the education of young school children. Of what value this information is to American educators is still open to exploration.

Notes

This research was made possible by the support of the Social Psychology Research Unit, Beverley Farm, University of Kent at Canterbury, England

Special thanks to Mr. Rowan, Mrs. Dyde, Mrs. Papa, Mrs. Thompson, and the children of St. Thomas's R. C. Primary School, Canterbury, Kent, England.

References

Berlak, Ann C., et al. "Teaching and Learning in English Primary Schools." In Martin Hammersley and Peter Woods (eds.), The Process of Schooling: A Sociological Reader. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1976.

Cruttenden, Alan. Language in Infancy and Childhood. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1979.

Halliday, Michael. Explorations in the Functions of Language. London: Arnold Publishing, Ltd., 1973.

Jones, Anthony and Mulford, Jeremy (eds.). Children Using Language: An Approach to English in the Primary School. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Primary Education in England: A Survey By Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools. London: Department of Education and Science, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1978.

Suggestions for an English Scheme. Canterbury, Kent: Kent Education Authority, 1975.

Wells, Gordon. Learning Through Interaction: The Study of Language Development. London: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Wilkinson, Andrew. The Foundations of Language: Talking and Reading in Young Children. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.